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KNOEPFEL'S

SCHOHARIE CAVE,

Schoharie County,

NEW-YORK:

WITH THE HISTORY OF ITS DISCOVERY, SUBTER-RANEAN LAKE, MINERALS, AND NATURAL CURIOSITIES.

Illustrated with Engravings.

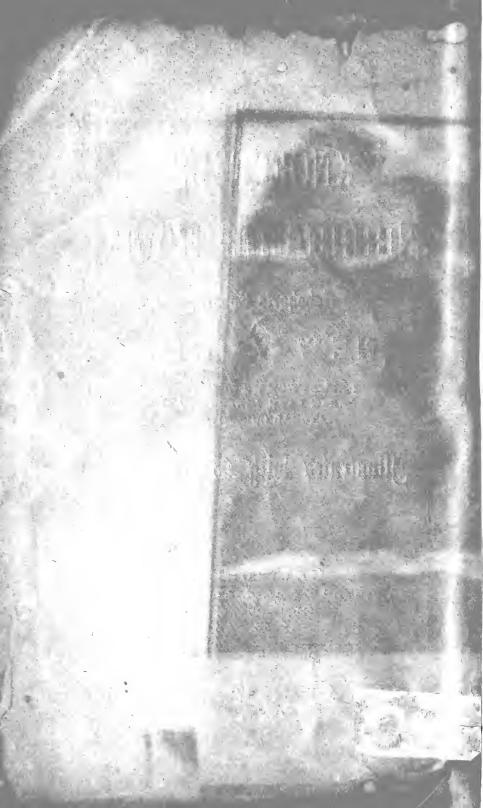
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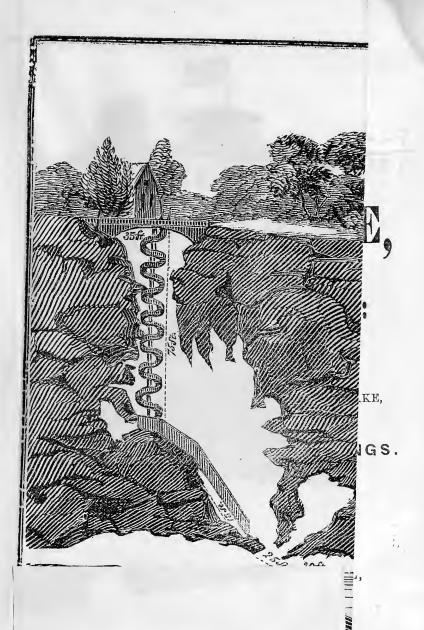
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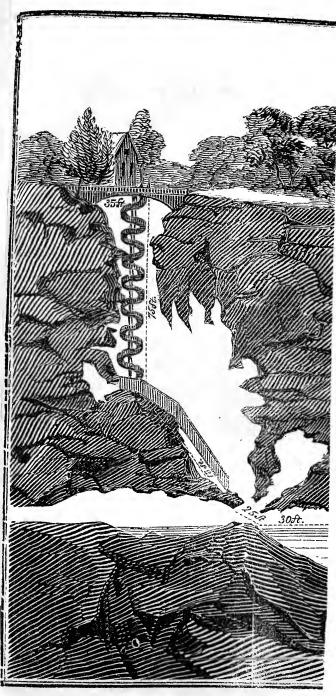
1853.

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Entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1853,

BY W. H. KNOEPFEL, and Por

in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of the United States for the Southern District of New-York.

KNOEPFEL'S

SUBTERRANEAN CAVE AND LAKE,

AT

SCHOHARIE.

THE traveller through many lands, after he has visited the various wonders of nature in the Old and New Worlds, is ready to acknowledge that the United States are inferior to no country on the globe, either in the number or the magnitude of their natural curiosities. Everything which nature does on this continent she does on a large scale. She is never dwarfed by want of means; she rolls her rivers three thousand miles before they reach the sea; she has lakes which are mighty inland seas; she has mountains, which, as they rise to the sky, carry half a world along with them; she has prairies, wide almost as the Great Desert, but wearing a character peculiarly their own. For waterfalls, she has Niagara, confessedly the wonder of the world, the great natural feature of our continent, which alone has enticed hither travellers from "the farthest Ind," and "the ultima Thule." And her forests in density, extent, and in the height and luxuriance of the trees, are not excelled by anything outside the tropics, and only yield to those of Hindostan which nurture the elephant and the tiger.

But there is one feature almost peculiar to America, which, as far as we know, is rarely to be found elsewhere. We allude to her wonderful subterranean caves. There are some in Norway, but they are unimportant in comparison. There are some in England—one particularly at Kirkdale; but these, though interesting on purely scientific grounds, for the store of fossils they contain, have no pretensions to compare with the caves of

America for size and grandeur. Of these the most celebrated and the largest, is undoubtedly the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, which, like Niagara, is world-renowned. It is familiar to all readers in every land; even the schoolboy is acquainted with it and knows it as well as the Pyramids. It is one of the wonders of the world. But the Mammoth Cave, even to the citizens of our Northern States, is a long way off, and time and travel are very costly; comparatively few people can afford to consume both time and travelling expenses. We, in New-York, almost find Niagara at our doors, compared with the distance of the Mammoth Cave.

The discovery of a new subterranean wonder within a few hours' ride of the Empire City, is a source of pride to the dwellers in the Empire State. As recently as 1831, this Cave, of which we are about to give a description, was unknown, probably, to a single human being. Situated only thirty miles from Albany, or 180 miles from New-York, it had passed unnoticed as well by the residents in its vicinity as by the passing traveller. Yet, here, in Schoharie County, within a day's journey of the Metropolis, was a wonder rivalling in its natural features, though not equalling in extent, the celebrated and distant Mammoth Cave.

It seems that the proprietor of the land in which this Cave is situated, had his notice attracted to an unusual opening in the earth shaped like an inverted cone, but almost hidden by bushes and briars. On closer investigation he became convinced that a subterranean cavity existed, the extent of which it was, of course, impossible to determine. Stimulated by curiosity, he continued to descend to the bottom of this cone, when he found his conjectures confirmed. An irregular, perpendicular fissure in the stratum of lime rock, extended far into the depths of the earth. It would appear that for some cause or another, he neglected to prosecute the search any further, and was satisfied with knowing that the Cave existed.

The discovery of the Cave, however, soon became the talk or the neighborhood, and old people, by their firesides, recounted tales narrated in years gone by. to the early settlers of that region, of a wonderful cavern known only to the aboriginal Red Men, and believed by them to be the entrance to the hunting grounds of the Great Spirit. These tales were mostly laughed at and the existence of the cavern was questioned or denied. The State of New-York, it was said, could not furnish such a

phenomenon.

Yet the State of New-York possessed the greatest cataract of the world, and why not a Mammoth Cave? The State of New-York could boast of mountains—the Catskills and the Alleghanies—which, if not so lofty as the White Mountains of New Hampshire, or the Rocky Mountains of Nebraska, were only just inferior to them, and possessing these, why should a Mammoth Cave be denied her? So the believers in the Scho-Harie Cavern persisted in its existence. They pointed to the fissure in the lime rock, which might well be the porch of some palace of the gnomes. The Cave at length got much talked about, and a party of gentlemen from Schoharie determined to confirm or disprove the tradition of its existence.

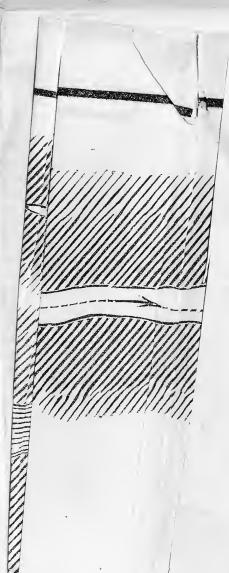
Accordingly, in September, 1831, they set out upon their journey of exploration. Their names were John Gebhard, Esq. a gentleman renowned as a mineralogist and a lover of nature, whose life was devoted to the prosecution of scientific inquiry. He was accompanied by Mr. Hubbard and Mr. Branch, who, though amateurs in science, had been successful in the collection of some rare cabinets of minerals and fossils. These gentlemen, on commencing their labors, found the aperture at about twenty feet below the surface, choked with logs and rubbish, which had been thrown into the eavity for the purpose of closing it up. After having, with considerable difficulty, cleared away the obstacles to their descent, the party entered upon their journey of exploration. Probably human foot had never trodden within those recesses-certainly not the foot of a white man. Nor did these gentlemen prepare for their descent with any expectation of revealing to the world a Mammoth Cave which should attract visiters from all parts of the country.

The descent, as we can well imagine, was perilous. But mineralogists and geologists in search of treasures, are not

usually to be daunted either by difficulties or dangers. mystery that was before them lured them on. The first that descended was Mr. Hubbard. A rope was fastened around his body, for the rock being perpendicular and the sides presenting a smooth surface, with the exception of a few slight projections, it was impossible to make use of hands or feet in the descent; he was therefore lowered by the rope till he gave the signal that he had found a resting place for his feet. This was a platform or ledge of rocks seventy-five feet below the surface, where the perpendicular descent was interrupted and declined to the South, down a rocky and precipitous declivity. Here Mr. Hubbard disengaged himself from the rope and waited until he was joined by Mr. Branch. When they had both reached this point they lighted their lamps and cast eager glances into the interior. All was dark, but not as silent as the tomb, for startled by the unwonted rays of the lamps, some bats which had taken shelter there fluttered around them in dismay and darted to the mouth of the cavern. After waiting some time the eyes of these gentlemen grew accustomed to the place, and with the aid of their lamps they were able to discern an opening in the rocks to the North, which they accordingly proceeded to explore; but it proved to be only a gallery of some twenty feet in length and about ten feet in width. Their attention, however, was arrested by the wondrous beauty of the crystals which hung from the roof and the sides. These, reflecting the rays of the lamps, shone like walls of diamonds and startled our adventurers into loud praises of their magnificence. On further investigation they found that this gallery contained also fine masses of arragonite, surpassing any they had ever before beheld. Having spent some time in admiring the beauties of this little place, they retraced their steps to the platform of rock where they had first alighted, and commenced a descent in an opposite direction. The greatest caution was necessary, for the abyss yawned beneath them and the passage was very rugged and narrow, not exceeding ten feet in width, and frequently decreasing to four. In this way they proceeded about sixty feet, the passage sloping at an angle of at least sixty degrees with the horizon. This declivity

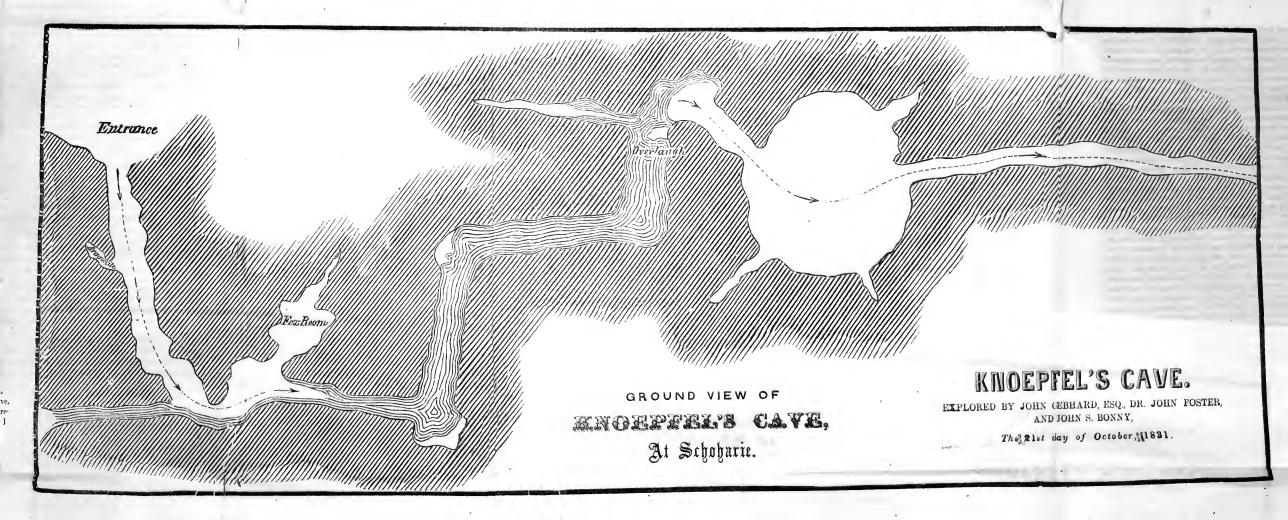
terminated suddenly, and the rock sheered off to an abrupt, perpendicular wall. Fortunately, upon lowering their lamps with a piece of cord, they discovered that this perpendicular wall did not exceed twenty feet, and although the attempt was perilous, they determined to descend. Aided by some projecting masses, they contrived, though with great difficulty, to reach the ledge beneath, whence they proceeded at the same inclination as before, and through a similar passage. The first object of their adventure was attained, for they had reached the bottom of the passage. On examination, they found that though the opening of the cavern, at this point, was only about ten feet in width, yet it was of great height; on the western side they discovered a small stream of pure water, which ran in a southerly direction. This purling stream seemed to indicate the course which they should take. Many times they had to stoop, for the roof was so low that they could not walk erect; but suddenly turning an angle in the rock, they entered a passage of just sufficient width to admit a man of ordinary size, and found themselves in an apartment of about twenty feet in diameter and more than a hundred feet in height. Their further progress was long arrested by their astonishment. The magnificent walls rose in stupendous grandeur, encrusted on all sides with transparent crystals of a vast size, formed by the dripping of the water through untold ages, from the interstices of the The effect was like a chapter of the Arabian Nights, wondrous and magical. The rays of their lamps were reflected from myriads of gleaming spars and glistening stalactites. They were wrapt in admiration. In the distance they heard the murmuring of the stream as it rolled onward into the unpenetrated and mysterious space. They spoke, and their voices dissolved in peals of sound reverberated by a hundred echoes. Still following the course of the stream, our explorers sought their way through a passage varying in width from eight to ten feet, when their further progress was arrested by the waters of a lake, into which the stream, whose course they had so long followed as their guide, suddenly emptied itself. This lake extended across the eavern and was of considerable size—its opposite shore being lost in the darkness into which the light of their lamps could not penetrate. They picked up some pebbles which they found at the edge of the lake, and tried to hurl them across, thereby to judge of its breadth; but the splash of water told them that the stones fell into the lake, and that the other shore was far away. Being thus unable to prosecute their researches any further, they retraced the path which they had traversed, and were at length drawn up into the light of day by the friends who awaited them without the cavern, and who were considerably alarmed by their protracted absence.

This was the first descent into that subterranean region. Of course it was much talked about. Scientific men heard of it and were interested. The cavern could not remain unexplored; the lake must be crossed. Accordingly, in a few weeks, arrangements were made for further explorations. This second expedition was headed by Dr. Joel Foster, and on the 21st of October, of the same year, a boat was procured wherewith to navigate the waters of this lower world. The gentlemen who formed this second party were Mr. Gebhard, Dr. Foster and Mr. Bonny. The latter gentleman furnished the boat, which was named, in honor of the occasion, the "Bonny Boat." The little craft was lowered by a rope and carried to the edge of the lake, where, not without some show of ceremony, it was launched-the first launch ever made since the birth of Time into those waters. Having fixed a light upon the prow, these subterranean mariners, without a compass, a chart, or a star to direct their course, commenced their voyage of discovery. They entered upon the lake through an arched passage of the rock so low as not to admit of their standing erect in the boat; they took a southerly direction and presently found themselves in water about thirty feet in depth, and so pure and crystalline that the smallest object was distinctly visible, by torchlight, on the smooth sand at the bottom. Pursuing their voyage, and varying their course to the right and left as the water wound around the several angles in the arched passage; which gradually ascended to a height which could not be ascertained by the light of their torches, and in others approached to within a few



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feet of the water, they at length arrived at a rugged shelving ascent on the right shore of the lake, under which its waters appeared to be lost; here they thrust the boat to the shore and landed. An aperture in the rock was directly fronting them; they passed through this aperture and a scene grand beyond conception, burst upon their astonished view. They stood, as it were, on the threshold of a large apartment, circular in form and of perfect regularity, to which they at once gave the name of the "ROTUNDA." The size and shape of this apartment are represented in the picture which accompany this work, especially in the ground plan of the Cave. This magnificent chamber is more than a hundred feet in height, descending on all sides gradually to the centre, forming a spacious gallery around its whole circumference, and enclosed above by a horizontal roof. From its walls flashed the rays of a million crystals, reflected from the torches of the visitors, and giving the scene an air of unimaginable splendor. They could not speak; surprise kept them dumb; they stood entranced with wonder. It was as if some magician's rod had called this subterranean palace into being as a dwelling-place for gnomes and spirits—those potent and mysterious beings of whom we read in the older romances. Indeed, the chamber was not inhabited but by creatures "of the earth, earthy,"-huge bat swhich had been hanging in clusters on the walls, and which, now startled by the unaccustomed light, commenced flapping their wings in fear, and flying around the cavern, causing, by the motion of their wings, a hollow sound like distant thunder. Our adventurous explorers, unwilling to lose this precious opportunity of gathering mineral specimens, which from their singularity and rarity were indeed treasures of importance, freighted their little vessel with a rich cargo and returned to the first waters of the lake, where they fastened their boat and conveyed their specimens in baskets to the upper world.

The zest for discovery was now fairly awakened, and within a very short period several expeditions were undertaken. Three additional apartments, each of them communicating with the Rotunda, and forming, as may be seen from the Map of the Ground Plan, small oratories, as it were, connecting with the main cathedral, were discovered at the next visit. These chambers were equally curious with the Rotunda in their own distinctive features. The most remarkable of them has been styled the "Music Room." Upon entering it, the ear of the visitor is saluted with sounds produced by the circulation of air, or water, or both, through the fissures of the rock, which are not unlike the dulcet tones of the Æolian harp. This natural melody comes near realizing the belief that this lower world is actually tenanted by a race of spirits who are pleased thus to welcome their human visitants to this their wonderful abode.

Returning from these chambers to the margin of the lake, another opening in the rock attracted the attention of the party. Upon examining this aperture, which was only twenty inches in height, the passage beyond appeared to expand and the water exhibited a broad, unruffled surface. In the true spirit of adventure it was resolved to explore this passage. A boat was accordingly constructed, corresponding in size with that of the aperture, which was only large enough to admit a single individual in a recumbent position. Having thus passed through the opening, each being shoved or drawn forward by his companions, they found that the rock again ascended in a dome-like shape, and that the lake, expanding as before, stretched onward for about a quarter of a mile before it was hidden from view by a projecting point of rock. Advancing in this new direction, their navigation was presently interrupted by a semicircular dam formed of calcareous tufa, over which the water broke with a slight ripple; this was only the first of a series of similar obstructions, for, having left the boat and pursued their way along a shingly, narrow shore, they counted fourteen of these miniature dams, over which the water broke in tiny cascades, forming a picture, as the light caught the edges of the current, altogether unparalleled and beautiful beyond description. The water in this part is quite deep, averaging about thirty-five feet, and is remarkably cool and clear as crystal. Shortly after these obstructions are passed, the lake appears to

terminate. The next object which presented itself to the adventurers, was the entrance to another room, which proved to be smaller than the others-about fifty feet square-and composed of a union of lime rock with the greywacke formation. The seene had now changed. Few crystals or incrustations appeared upon the walls; all was sullen gloom, unrelieved by the reflected light of a single gem, which, like stars in the darkness, had irradiated the former apartments with the beauty of meteors shining through a cloudless night. Upon the floor were scattered, in confused masses, ponderous rocks, which seemed but recently precipitated from the roof. The sullen roar of an invisible waterfall resounding through the yawning fissures, added to the mystery and solemnity of the scene; it might have been the haunt of Macbeth's witches, or some sorcerer's cavern, deep down in the bowels of the earth where earthquakes have their beginning. Here, for the first time, our travellers were daunted; their torches threw no light into the abyss before them, for the rays were everywhere intercepted by ponderous masses of rock which had either fallen to the ground or yet impended menacingly from the roof. They had penetrated about a mile from the mouth of the Cave and had proved the safety of descent and of progress thus far. Here was the barrier where their efforts, at least for a time, were to terminate. and, with the assurance that they had made a discovery that would add vet fresh interest to the many natural wonders of the Empire State, they broke up their exploring expedition.

Whatever curiosity the Cavern, per se, may excite, the richness of its mineralogical treasures will more particularly recommend it both to the general visiter and the man of science. In this respect, though many caverns have been explored, some of which have exceeded, in size, this remarkable Schoharie Cave, very few have equalled it in the value of its minerals. It is true that in the northern passage, with the exception of the semi-circular dams of calcareous tufa deposited by the running waters, but few formations of interest are found in the northern passage, but in all the spacious apartments and vaulted passages south of the entrance, both stalactites and stalagmites of

the purest white alabaster, from three to eighteen inches in length, and from one to seven inches in diameter, are found in prodigal numbers; they glitter in countless multitudes from the walls and from the roof, in the grottos, in the chambers and along the course of the lake. Nothing more beautiful can be imagined—the effect is as dazzling as the frozen snow upon the branches of trees glittering in the rays of the midnight moon. One of the stalagmites, found in a small apartment adjacent to the Rotunda, is, from its vast size and beauty, deserving of particular notice. Its base, of an elliptical form, somewhat resembling in shape the foot of a candlestick, was three feet six inches in its greatest length, and two feet six inches in its greatest breadth, with a plane surface underneath; but from its upper surface, rising regularly on all sides to the centre, a column of fifteen by ten inches rose to the height of seventeen inches, terminating with a plane surface at the top; a projection extended horizontally from the top, from which were suspended forty-one stalactites from one to five inches in length; on the base were two stalagmites—one seven, the other five inches in length; there were six other small stalagmites formed upon it which were unavoidably broken off by its removal. The stalactites formed an angle with the horizon of about forty degrees, but the two stalagmites on the base were perpendicular; this anomaly can only be accounted for on the supposition that it had changed its position after the formation of the stalactites and before the growth of the stalagmites had commenced. This mammoth specimen, supposed to weigh four hundred pounds, the whole of the most beautiful white alabaster, was, with great difficulty, removed to the margin of the water, placed in the boat and taken to the entrance, where, with the aid of a windlass, it was drawn to the surface and transferred to the cabinet of the discoverer and earliest ex-Plorer of the Cavern, John Gebhard, Esq., where it remains the principal object of attraction in his large collection of mineralogical and fossil curiosities.

It is rather a singular fact, that in the principal subterranean caverns of this continent, no fossil remains have been discovered. The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, as far as yet explored, does not contain a single specimen. This is likewise the case with the celebrated Schoharie Cave. Bones have been found, but they were not fossilized, and were evidently those of animals that had accidentally fallen in and perished. Thus, the easterly chamber, the second from the entrance, is called the "Fox Room," from the circumstance of a skeleton of that animal being found therein; that the creature had fallen in, and, without being killed by the fall, had perished of hunger, there could be little doubt.

Besides the materials already mentioned, beautiful specimens of "flos ferri," interesting alike for its rarity and elegance, have been obtained. There have also been found crystals of the fibrous carbonate of lime, at least four inches in length, in clusters of the most varied and fanciful arrangement.

From a brief description of this Cavern, written for a local newspaper, at the time of its first discovery, we extract the following remarks, to which we shall append some slight comments:

"The imposing appearance of this superbly decorated range of apartments—the novelty of navigating a crystal lake by torchlight, beneath an arch of massive rock, at the distance of some hundred feet from the surface of the earth,—the breathless excitement resulting from the real and imaginary dangers of the enterprise,—the extravagant creations of childhood, and the no less fantastic visions of maturer years. half fiction and half fact, which the wildness of the scene is calculated to summon up, and to which fancy may appropriate this lonely temple of nature, who seems to have lavished upon it her bounties solely for the purpose of giving a "local habitation" to the poet's world of marvel, are of themselves sufficient to render this Cavern a place of frequent and interesting resort; but the difficulty of access, the danger of the descent, the contracted apertures through which many of its most interesting apartments are entered, will probably prevent its ever being much visited as a subject of mere curiosity,

and when the votaries of science shall have rifled its treasures, the stillness of night will again settle upon the magnificent Rotunda, and its circumjacent offices and arcades will be unbroken save by the flapping of the "bat's dusky wing," or the plaintive tones of the invisible musician wasting his minstrelsy upon the "desert air." Nature will resume the implements of her alchemy and recommence the formation and arrangement of ornaments for her rocky palace, where she has for centuries held undisputed sway and revelled in all the wantonness of majestic architecture and fantastic decoration."

Now, the writer of this paragraph was certainly altogether mistaken. It could not happen that a curiosity so remarkable could be long suffered to remain unvisited. It had no sooner fallen into the hands of its present proprietor, Mr. W. H. Knoepfel, of New-York, than he conceived the design of opening it to the public as one of the finest natural wonders of the State of New-York.

For this purpose, as the engraving of the sectional view, accompanying this pamphlet, will show, he is about to construct a perpendicular, spiral stair-ease which will conduct the visiter to the first landing place leading to the Arragonite Chamber. [See engraving.] From this point another crainary staircase will conduct, by a gradual and easy declivity, to The means of descent will be simplithe floor of the Cavern. fied so that the most delicate lady can have no hesitation in commending herself to these subterranean depths; nor will the contracted apertures, or the low-browed roofs of the passages be any obstacle; for the former are to be heightened and the passages are to be widened, so that any individual may pass in safety and comfort. One of French's Life Boats will be put upon the lake. The ruggedness of the floors will be removed, and, while all the beauties and sublimities of the Cavern will remain in their integrity, the difficulty of penetrating its recesses will be reduced to that minimum point which shall leave enough of adventure to give interest to the undertaking.

Nor can it be doubted that the public will be slow to avail themselves of the facilities thus offered them to extend their acquaintance with the wonderful works of nature. When it is known, that within a few hours journey of New-York City, by the Hudson River Railroad, with a brief jaunt over the Albany Plank Road, almost the same subterranean wonders can be explored as if, at fifty times the cost, and by the sacrifice of days, and almost weeks, where hours now suffice, he had gone to Kentucky to pay a visit to the Mammoth Cave, the citizen whose opportunities of spending a long time from his home are very few and far between, will be eager to profit by the advantage. How few of us there are who dream of visiting the Mammoth Cave! A few days at a time are all that the demands and exigencies of business leave us to call our own. Take the population of New-York, and not one person in fifty has seen Niagara, which is not removed from our doors a fourth of the distance of the Mammoth Cave. But here, at a stone's throw, in comparison, is the Schoharie Cave,—a curiosity almost as wonderful, and which will, before long, be almost equally world-renowned. Situated only thirty miles from Albany, it is within the power of the poorest individual, sometime or other, to pay it a hurried visit and to bear away a lasting impression of its beauties.

Nor will the Cave be the sole attraction of the place. Nowhere, in the Empire State, is the scenery more picturesque than in Schoharie County. In the neighborhood of the SCHOHARIE CAVE, it is nearly unequaled for quiet, pastoral beauty. From the eminence on which the Mr. Knoepfel's property is situated, a sweep of between twenty and thirty miles in circumference is embraced by the eye, unassisted by any telescope. The general features of the landscape are a beautiful interchange of hill and plain—a swelling undulation of land, rich with verdure, both of the field and of the forest. Around the distant horizon, hills shut out the view, and occasionally, from a wide expanse of table-land, a mountain rises in solitary grandeur. The spot when improved by MR. KNOEPFEL, and laid out into flower gardens, nurseries and soft rolling meadows, will be a paradise for lovers of natural haunts and pastoral shades. It is Mr. KNOEPFEL'S intention

to erect Hotels with every accommodation for the numerous visiters who will be attracted by the Schoharie Cave. From the observatory, on the roof of the house which will be erected near the mouth of the Cavern, the visiter will be charmed with a prospect so uniformly beautiful, so fascinating in every feature, that he will coincide in the general opinion that the neighborhood of this subterranean wonder is an actual Garden of Eden.

The improvements now in contemplation, will occupy considerable time, and it is not expected that full arrangements can be made for visiters before the summer of 1854. The public will be notified of the fact of their completion, both by advertisement and by the issue of a second edition of this little work. In the meantime, any mineralogist or other person devoted to the pursuit of natural science, will be gratified by paying a visit to the spot even in its present unfinished state.



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